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Accommodating learners with specific learning difficulties in educational settings: Problems and solutions

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Abstract

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) such as dyslexia and ADHD are very common: it is estimated that 10% of the world population has some kind of learning difficulty. Due to the challenges learners with SpLDs face in the teaching-learning process, such learners may not achieve the expected educational goals. Therefore, it is important to make necessary changes in the teaching-learning process to accommodate those learners. For this, education systems should recognise the importance of inclusive practices at policy level and teacher educators and teachers should have thorough understanding of inclusive practices. However, teachers' lack of knowledge on SpLDs, lack of teacher training programmes which address the issue and lack of sustainable policy on inclusive practices are some key issues that education systems face in accommodating learners with SpLDs.

Recently a teacher-training programme on SpLDs and inclusive practices was conducted in Sri Lanka. Questionnaire and interview responses collected in this programme also highlighted the above issues in addition to other issues such as teachers' negative attitudes towards SpLDs, institutional barriers such as rigid examination systems and negative socio-cultural ideology towards SpLDs (Indrarathne, 2019). The same programme was then extended to India where similar findings were visible. In this presentation, I will discuss these findings in detail by highlighting the barriers to implementing inclusive practices and discuss possible solutions. During the presentation, I will do a short task to raise participants' awareness on the features of different types of SpLDs. The participants will also be asked to share their experiences of inclusive practices in their contexts. They will then work in groups to discuss possible solutions before having a whole group discussion on possible future challenges in implementing inclusive practices.

Introduction

Specific Learning Difficulties (SpLDs) is an umbrella term used to categorise learning difficulties such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Kormos, 2017), which all affect some aspects of learning. For example, those who have dyslexia encounter difficulties in language processing; dyscalculia affects learning mathematics; dysgraphia affects writing skills; dyspraxia affects motor-control/coordination; and those with ADHD show issues in attention and control of emotions. Although these difficulties are separately named, some of their features overlap and most co-exist among individuals (ibid). It is also important to note that SpLDs can exist in a continuum from mild to severe (ibid). Depending on the nature and the severity of the difficulty, an individual's performance in the learning process may vary.

Usually, identification of SpLDs depends on the academic achievements demonstrated by individuals relative to their cognitive potential (Shapiro, Palmer, Wachtel & Capute, 1984). Therefore, educationists, particularly teachers should play an important role in initial identification of learners with SpLDs by being able to assess their academic performance related to their cognitive potential. In addition, teachers should also play an important role in creating an inclusive environment to "include everybody, celebrate differences, support learning, and respond to individual needs" (United Nations Children's Fund, 2011, p. 3) in the teaching-learning process. However, it is widely accepted that teachers have lack of awareness on inclusion (Forlin, 2013). One of the major causes of this is the lack of systematic teacher training provided to teachers on SpLDs and inclusive practices (ibid).

This current paper summarises the findings of three teacher training programmes conducted in South Asia (Sri Lanka and India) in which teachers' knowledge and attitudes related to SpLDs and inclusive practices were investigated. This also discusses common challenges these participants face when introducing inclusive practices in their respective contexts. Based on the data collected from the participants, the paper also highlights possible solutions to overcome the challenges.

Literature review

As teachers play a key role in children's academic achievements, it is vital for them to have thorough knowledge on not only educational theories and subject content, but also how individual differences affect learning. In this context, having knowledge on SpLDs and inclusive practices is a must for teachers. This becomes even more critical when looking at the number of children that have SpLDs. It has been estimated that 10% of the world population suffers from learning difficulties (Kormos & Smith, 2012). In other words, one in ten children may show some form of learning difficulties. This reflects how important it is for teachers to have an understanding of SpLDs.

Although the importance of teachers having knowledge on SpLDs is apparent, research in many contexts around the world shows that teachers often have negative attitudes towards learners with learning difficulties. For example, Hettiarachchi and Das (2014) found that teachers in Sri Lanka consider learners with disabilities as 'misfits' in the mainstream education system. Similarly, Tiwari, Das and Sharma's (2015) study in Delhi, India revealed that teachers think lack of motivation is the cause for learning difficulties. Another study conducted with the participation of English teaching professionals in Sri Lanka also revealed that teachers usually categorise such learners as 'weak' and punish them for not demonstrating learning gains, believing that there is lack of effort from such students (Indrarathne, 2019). Such attitudes negatively affect learners' performance at classroom level. Some evidence for this comes in Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh and Voeten's (2010) study which revealed that teachers' negative attitudes towards learners with dyslexia affected spelling achievement test scores.

Negative attitudes towards learners with SpLDs seem to be linked to teachers' lack of awareness on inclusion (Forlin, 2013). Evidence for this comes from research conducted in different parts of the world. For example, Alawadh's (2016) study in the Arabic context, Chitsa and Mpofu's (2016) study in Zimbabwe and Indrarathne's (2019) study in Sri Lanka show that teachers have minimal understanding of SpLDs and inclusion. This is largely due to lack of emphasis on SpLDs and inclusion in both in-service and pre-service teacher training programmes (Alawadh, 2016, Chitsa & Mpofu, 2016, Indrarathne, 2019). Lack of training also affects the way that teachers implement inclusive practices. In Alawadh's study, teachers revealed that they feel unprepared to introduce inclusive practices as they do not have sufficient knowledge on SpLDs or inclusion. Conversely, Taylor and Coyne's (2014) study in the UK and Martan, Mihić and Matošević's (2017) study in Croatia highlight that those teachers who are knowledgeable on dyslexia have positive attitudes towards such learners. In addition, studies such as, Gwernan-Jones and Burden's (2009), Kormos and Nijakowska's (2017) and Indrarathne's (2019) show that systematic teacher training on SpLDs and inclusion can inculcate positive attitudes among teachers on learners with learning difficulties and increase their self-efficacy and confidence in implementing inclusive practices.

Not only teachers' attitudes and knowledge on SpLDs and inclusion, but also several other factors determine how inclusive practices are implemented in an education system. One of the main factors is how educational systems view inclusion. For example, if all levels of the system are willing to implement inclusive practices, teachers become more confident in introducing inclusive practices at classroom level (Indrarathne, 2019). However, teachers often face several institutional barriers in implementing inclusive practices. One barrier is the rigid curriculum/syllabus they have to follow in a limited period of time (ibid). This limits their ability to recognise individual differences among learners and they follow a 'one size fits all' model. As a result, learners who have learning difficulties either drop out or do not achieve the expected educational goals. In addition to this, many education systems are based on rigid examinations and teachers are expected to prepare learners to face tests (Murray & Christison, 2012). This also reduces teachers' ability to thoroughly pay attention to individual learner needs.

Apart from institutional barriers, teachers face sociocultural pressure when introducing inclusive practices at school level. For example, in certain societies, there are negative attitudes towards learning disabilities (e.g. Tiwari et al., 2015). As a result, parents may have negative attitudes towards inclusive practices (Scorgie, 2015). In the Sri Lankan context, teachers believe that parents of children with SpLDs may not be ready to accept that their children have learning difficulties (Indrarathne, 2019). At the same time, children without learning

difficulties and their parents may not be willing to accept accommodations made to assist learners with learning difficulties (ibid). Teachers also face challenges in implementing inclusive practices if their colleagues do not have sufficient knowledge on inclusion (ibid).

In addition to such barriers, there are some practical problems that may limit implementing inclusive practices. For example, in certain contexts, there are large classes and, as a result, teachers are unable to pay sufficient attention to individual needs of learners (Yada & Savolainen, 2017). Teachers may also not have sufficient access to technology and tools to design teaching aids (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014 and Yada & Savolainen, 2017) and lack of reference materials to understand techniques may also hinder a teacher's ability to design learner friendly teaching aids (Indrarathne, 2019).

The discussion so far has revealed that introducing inclusive practices in an education system is challenging, mainly due to teachers' lack of awareness and institutional barriers. In order to investigate these issues further in the South Asian context, the feedback provided by participants of the three aforementioned teacher training projects has been analysed and reported in this paper. It attempts to answer the following research questions.

RQ1: What do the teacher training programmes reveal on teachers' attitudes and knowledge on SpLDs and inclusion?

RQ2: What are the main challenges identified by teachers to implement inclusive practices in the Sri Lankan and Indian contexts?

Methodology

Context

The context of this study was three teacher-training programmes conducted in Sri Lanka and India. (1) The first was a programme on dyslexia and foreign language teaching aimed at English Language Teaching (ELT) professionals in Sri Lanka. (2) The second was on the same theme conducted in three states in India for ELT professionals. (3) The third project was conducted in Sri Lanka with the participation of stakeholders in the primary education sector on the theme of SpLDs and inclusive practices for primary education. In the South Asian region, teachers do not usually receive sufficient training on SpLDs and inclusive practices either in pre-service or in-service programmes (e.g. Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013; Hettiarachchi & Das, 2014). Therefore, these three teacher-training programmes were conducted mainly to raise awareness on learning difficulties and inclusive practices.

In all three programmes, a series of awareness raising workshops were conducted. In the first two projects, the content covered: the main features of dyslexia; identifying dyslexic learners in class, inclusive classroom techniques; the multi-sensory structured language teaching approach (MSLT), teaching language skills, grammar and vocabulary and assessing learners with dyslexia. Topics such as curriculum/materials design were also briefly discussed in workshops where more policy planners took part. In the third programme, apart from the above content, the focus was placed more upon discussing features of all SpLDs, not just dyslexia. This is because this programme was aimed at primary educators who come across a range of learners who may show features of different SpLDs. The materials were prepared mainly based on DysTEFL project materials (Dystefl, 2017) and other research and practitioner materials (e.g. Kormos & Smith, 2012). A set of language independent SpLD assessment tests developed by ELT well (ELT well, 2017) was also used.

Participants

The participants in the three projects were educational professionals, mainly teachers. They were asked to provide feedback on the content covered in the workshop by answering a questionnaire. Feedback collected from 100 English language teacher trainers, 129 English language teachers and 15 English language teaching policy planners in the first project was included in this analysis. Feedback from 87 English teachers/teacher trainers in the second project was also included. From the third project, feedback from 57 primary education specialists (teacher educators, teachers, policy planners) was included in the analysis.

The participants' teaching experience varied from one to 40 years of experience in their respective educational sectors. They covered a range of contexts: primary schools, secondary schools, universities, teacher training colleges, regional in-service teacher training providers, local language schools, government and non-government educational organisations, government ministries and national and international teacher education providers.

Instrument and data analysis

Participants' feedback was collected using a questionnaire. It contained questions on the usefulness of the training, the possibility and challenges of implementing the inclusive practices introduced in the training in their respective contexts and further support they might need. In analysing the data, thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012) was used. Emerging themes and sub-themes were identified.

Results and discussion

Teachers' knowledge and attitudes on SpLDs and inclusive practices

In the first project, the participants' feedback highlighted that most of them did not have a clear understanding of SpLDs, how to recognise learners with SpLDs, and the teacher's role in creating inclusive environment (Indrarathne, 2019). Similarly, the participant feedback in the other two projects indicates that most of them did not have a clear understanding of the features of SpLDs or how to identify learners with SpLDs. For example, the following extract from a participant in the second project summarises the majority views in all three programmes.

1. So many things which was unknown to me I came to know in this workshop. Things are getting clear to me .. I used to see this sort of students every year in my class but never knew the problems they face.

The previous study based on the first programme (Indrarathne, 2019) also provides a comprehensive discussion on participants' lack of knowledge on SpLDs and how that shaped their attitudes on learners with learning difficulties. They largely had negative attitudes towards such learners as they did not know that their struggle can be caused by SpLDs. As a result, most participants stated that learners with SpLDs were neglected and on certain occasions were even punished for not attempting to reach the educational achievements demonstrated by the other children (ibid). Previous studies done in the Indian context also show negative attitudes prevailing among teachers on children with SpLDs (e.g. Das, Kuyini & Desai, 2013). Similarly, in the second and third projects, the participants stated that learners with SpLDs are usually neglected in their contexts. The following are two extracts taken from participant feedback in the third project. They highlight how learners with SpLDs are affected due to teachers' lack of knowledge on such difficulties.

2. Due to our negligence millions of children with learning difficulties drop out from schools [translated from Sinhala]
3. This training gave me an opportunity to reflect on my practice as a teacher and I now know that I have failed as a teacher [translated from Sinhala]

Challenges to implementing inclusive practices

Indrarathne (2019) gives a comprehensive account of the type of challenges that the participants of the first project face when implementing inclusive practices in their contexts. Among them, the most prominent is the institutional barriers. For example, teachers are provided with heavy syllabuses by the education system with minimal flexibility for change. The main aim of these education systems is to teach the syllabus aiming at national examinations which are also rigid and very competitive. In such contexts, teachers are faced with time, institutional and parental pressure to teach the syllabus. Thus, individual needs of learners are neglected, and all learners are treated alike. The feedback provided by the participants in the second and third projects also highlighted institutional barriers as the key challenge in implementing inclusive practices.

4. In our state everybody is more focused on only completing the syllabus [which is a challenge in implementing inclusive practices]

In order to implement inclusive practices, teachers also need the support from the hierarchy. The following comment indicates this.

5. I need to convince my management and principal [to implement these]

If such support is not given to teachers, they may not be able to introduce changes into the teaching-learning process. The participants in the second and third projects also gave evidence on how rigid examination systems create unnecessary pressure for both teachers and learners with learning difficulties.

6. Changing the question paper pattern [is challenging] because dyslexia is still to be accepted as a difficulty.

Apart from these institutional barriers, teachers face social pressure in implementing inclusive practices. In the first project, the participants mentioned that the parents may be reluctant to accept that their children have SpLDs and/or all parents and other children may not approve of giving extra support to such learners (Indrarathne, 2019). The participants in the second and third projects raised the same issues. For example, the following extract from project two shows that parents' unawareness may cause misunderstanding between them and the school/teacher.

7. The awareness of the parents and how they would react to this is an important concern since they may not see their children as 'normal' anymore and there are chances that the dyslexic children feel awkward about the way they are being treated.

In addition to these challenges, the participants in all three projects highlighted other barriers such as time pressure, lack of resources, lack of scope to create learner friendly teaching aids, lack of financial assistance and lack of reference materials when implementing inclusive practices in their respective contexts.

Solutions

The participants also suggested several steps that can be taken to strengthen the inclusive education within their contexts. The majority in all three programmes agree that they do not have sufficient opportunities to learn about SpLDs and inclusive practices. Most of them requested more training, workshops, resources and extended teacher-training programmes to enhance their understanding. They also emphasised the importance of spreading such training to reach all teachers. For example, as illustrated by a participant in the second project:

8. Such training is the need for all the teachers who are working in different schools... make it possible to give it at a large scale so that all may be benefited.

This strengthens the argument that systematic teacher training is vital for successful implementation of inclusive practices (e.g., Sharma, Forlin, & Loreman, 2008).

One common finding in the comments is that the participants are willing to implement inclusive practices within their contexts if they are given opportunity. For example, the following extract from a participant in the second project summarises what teachers expect from the hierarchy.

9. Freedom to choose my style of teaching to my students as a teacher without being constrained by exams and curriculum.

This suggests that the overall education system has an important role to play in encouraging teachers to implement inclusive practices by giving them adequate flexibility in the teaching learning process.

Although Waters and Vilches (2001) emphasise the importance of giving teachers the ownership of new introductions to the education system, the findings in the current study highlight that there is still a strong hierarchical influence which affects educational practices in countries like India and Sri Lanka. Therefore, some

form of enabling legislation which comes from the top level of education management seems to be vital in implementing inclusive practices in these contexts.

Apart from systematic teacher training and hierarchical support, the participants also emphasised the importance of making available physical resources at school level in order to provide better educational opportunities to learners with SpLDs. For example, resources to: identify SpLDs, prepare additional teaching aids, and educate the wider public, are seen as important aspects to successfully implement inclusive practices.

Conclusion

The findings of the three teacher training projects discussed in this paper highlight that teachers' knowledge on inclusion plays a key role in successfully implementing inclusive practices in an education system. In order to increase their knowledge on SpLDs and inclusion, regular teacher training programmes should be conducted. In addition to training teachers, it is also important for the education systems to recognise the importance of inclusion and provide teachers with necessary guidance. Getting the larger community involved in implementing inclusive practices at school level may help to eliminate prevailing misconceptions on learning difficulties and inclusion.

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